

The Cambridge history of Irish literature

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Norman Vance

Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1405 pp., £160.

This is a valuable and impressive work. It is good to be reminded that the difficulties of writing good literary history do not deter some of the best modern scholars and critics from attempting it, and the thirty contributors to this work are in good company. The excellent *Oxford English Literary History*, inaugurated in 2002, is now well under way. The Longman Literature in English series, begun in 1985, is still in progress, and the editors of the present volumes allude respectfully to the new *Cambridge History of American Literature*.

There were of course older Cambridge literary histories, such as the multi-volume *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907-16) which included a pioneering chapter on 'Anglo-Irish Literature' by that undervalued Irish writer A.P. Graves (rather too dismissively treated in the present work). There was also an earlier *Oxford History of English Literature* (1945-97) which dealt with Irish writing in passing. But this is the first comprehensive large-scale History of Irish Literature. As the editors acknowledge, it comes in the wake of the compendious and controversial *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (3 vols, 1991) and its two-volume supplement devoted to Irish women's writing (2002), and it benefits from them. But it also follows the less noisily received *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (1996) and the poet Thomas Kinsella's idiosyncratic *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986) which strategically reduced coverage of 'Anglo-Irish' verse to make space for less familiar material translated from Irish, Latin and Norman French.

Following Kinsella's example, both *Field Day* and the *Oxford Companion* side-stepped earlier ideological debates about what was properly Irish or 'national', and indeed what was 'Literature', by aspiring to linguistic, generic and social inclusiveness, dealing with material in Irish, Latin and English and taking some account of historical, political, scientific and religious writing and of recoverable oral tradition. They also reflected the vastly enlarged historical perspectives of a new generation of readers and scholar-critics for whom it was no longer sufficient to regard Irish literature worthy of the name as more or less beginning with the handful of nineteenth-century writers Yeats happened to have read and liked, apart from a few faint stirrings associated with Swift and (possibly) Burke.

The *Cambridge History* inherits and develops these generous aspirations, heroically attempting to refine bibliographical inclusiveness into thematised narrative. The difficulties of the task, and the magnificence of the achievement, should not be underestimated. Making this history has involved making peace in many directions. Apart from the usual scholarly and critical debates about provenance, influence and value, Irish literary history, like Irish history generally, has often been an ideological battlefield, with 'Irish Irish' perceptions at daggers-drawn with more 'Anglo-Irish' constructions of the tradition. 'History' and 'Theory' have sometimes intruded awkwardly and controversially on what were once regarded as unsullied new-critical textual domains. To be effective, Irish literary historians need not just to be on speaking terms with each other but to be good travellers and good correspondents as the published and unpublished materials and the available expertise are widely scattered. There are considerable linguistic and textual challenges to be negotiated in the earliest writings. Ireland's difficult and excited political history and the constant

fragmentation of its communities of writers makes it easier to write notes than narrative, to demonstrate discontinuity rather than continuity.

Despite all this, to our great benefit, expert and (usually) tactful contributors from both sides of the Atlantic, drawing on some of the best recent scholarship and criticism, have lucidly surveyed fifteen centuries of Irish literary tradition in its major languages, Latin, Irish and English. Early medieval Irish writing in Norman French is also briefly discussed, as is eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing in Ulster Scots (variously regarded as a dialect and as a language in its own right), mainly the work of the ‘Rhyming Weavers’ admired by modern Irish poets such as John Hewitt and Tom Paulin. Old Norse material of arguably Irish provenance, and Old Norse influence, what Joyce called ‘Scandiknavery’, noted more than a century ago by George Sigerson, are ignored, as they nearly always are (the Irish will probably forgive the English before they forgive the Vikings). But the term ‘saga’, borrowed from Old Norse, is almost absent-mindedly used to describe Irish-language narratives: at least some of these may owe a greater formal debt to Scandinavia than is usually acknowledged.

The first, and slightly larger, volume, dealing with material before 1890, is in some ways the more useful because it addresses a long-standing chronological imbalance, and information gap, in Irish literary studies. Indeed nine of its fifteen chapters engage with writing before 1800. The second volume takes us up to the present of Paul Muldoon and Colm Tóibín, with a helpful chapter by Kevin Rockett on ‘Cinema and Irish literature’. Taken as a whole, the work represents a stimulus as well as a resource for which every student of literature must be enduringly grateful. The full treatment of Irish and Latin materials is particularly valuable: despite the lip-service constantly paid by Irish politicians and poets alike to the long tradition of

literature in Irish, there were until now few reliable and accessible modern accounts of it available in English, and the interesting and important tradition of Irish writing in Latin was even more inaccessible to non-specialists. The treatments are more expository than argumentative, as is appropriate to a work of this nature, but there are some useful correctives such as Marc Caball's claim that the cult of courtly love had a less exclusive influence on late medieval poetry in Irish than is often claimed, and that the poetry developed from a combination of Gaelic, English and broader European literary cultures.

The rich, even bewildering complexity of recent and contemporary Irish writing, in which Belfast and Derry as well as literary Dublin now have a significant role, is helpfully charted in the second volume. The long, well-informed, critically alert chapters by Patrick Crotty on Irish Renaissance poetry, John Wilson Foster on Irish Renaissance prose and Dillon Johnson and Guinn Batten on contemporary poetry are particularly user-friendly. Useful 'Afterwords' on Ireland's Irish-language and English-language literatures in the new millennium remind us that the traditions continue and that the creative stimuli, aggravations and anxieties of influence from the rich and varied past will not easily go away.

It seems ungrateful to grumble, but like even the greatest of human endeavours the work is not perfect. It is impressively accurate and has clearly been carefully proof-read, but even so, a few trivial slips have crept in. It is implied, for example, that the family of the seventeenth-century poet Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, was 'New English' (I, p.176) but it was actually 'Old English', of Norman-Irish descent. Mrs Oliphant was indeed the 'memoirist', but not actually the 'daughter-in-law', of William Blackwood (I, p.437). More seriously, an irritatingly inadequate index makes it unnecessarily difficult to find things and fails to do justice

to the full range of material included. John Elliott Cairnes, an important nineteenth-century Irish political economist, and J.H. Todd, a leading Victorian authority on St Patrick, are mentioned in the text but not in the index. The seventeenth-century worthy Sir James Ware is quite misleadingly described as a 'publisher' in the index which omits the reference to the passage where he is more helpfully described as an 'antiquarian' (I, p.214). There is a useful ten-page Chronology in each volume but specifically literary events (apart from Nobel Prizes for Literature) tend not to be mentioned, so the detailed interplay between literature and history is not immediately apparent.

Despite its best endeavours, the work is not always quite as comprehensive as one might have expected, so that a few opportunities to demonstrate connections and possible continuities are lost. St Donatus of Fiesole sang the praises of his native Ireland in elegant Latin verse in the ninth century, to the delight of literary patriots for the next thousand years, including Archbishop MacHale of Tuam and Thomas Kinsella, but he is not mentioned. The only surviving copy of the earliest known Morality Play in English, the (possibly) fourteenth-century *Pride of Life*, was scribbled on the back of some old accounts of the Priory of Holy Trinity in Dublin. Some features of the language resemble that of English-language material of known Irish provenance associated with Friar Michael of Kildare, which suggests that the original as well as the copy may have been Irish, but there is no reference to the play in the present work. To be fair, it would be hard to incorporate it into an historical narrative since, like so much Irish writing in English from earlier periods, it seems to have been soon forgotten and to have had no discernible influence on subsequent Irish writing. The earliest plays the *Cambridge History* mentions by name date from the

middle of the sixteenth century, but they had no enduring influence either. There is a later chapter dedicated to Irish drama, but that begins in 1690.

Other medieval writing was less easily forgotten. We learn here of the still-resented twelfth-century Anglo-Norman apologist Giraldus Cambrensis, writing in Latin, who influentially set the tone for colonialist condescension, but John Lynch's learned and effective refutation *Cambrensis Eversus* (1662), one of the most significant Irish works in Latin of the seventeenth century, is not discussed. Lynch is in fact mentioned in passing (I, p.214) but does not feature in the over-selective index.

The Victorian poet and Catholic convert Aubrey De Vere (1814-1902) is mentioned, but not the later, better-known and more controversial convert Shane Leslie (1885-1971), novelist and biographer. We have Oscar Wilde, of course, and his mother Jane Elgee, the Young Ireland poet 'Speranza', but not, unaccountably, his father the distinguished antiquarian William Wilde. It is good to see a brief discussion of the Ulster-born writer, scholar-critic and religious apologist C.S. Lewis, but there is no mention of Lewis's great-great-grandfather Hugh Hamilton (1729-1805), Bishop of Ossory, also a learned and influential religious apologist as well as a distinguished mathematician and physicist, much admired by his descendant. Nor is there any mention of the Galway novelist Joseph O'Neill (1885-1953), whose strange fantasy narratives such as *Wind from the North* (1934) and *Land Under England* (1935) probably influenced Lewis's science fiction.

No one individual could possibly command the enormous range of literary material to be investigated, or live long enough to write it up, and the different interests and concerns of the thirty contributors necessarily and valuably reflect the complexity and diversity of the material, but that causes problems. It is in some ways a tribute to the complex significance of the cantankerous visionary poet and journalist

Patrick Kavanagh that he appears in no fewer than four different chapters in the second volume, but this scattered treatment inhibits overall assessment.

Despite tactful editorial nudging and discreet cross-referencing larger themes and continuities are not always followed through. Thomas Kinsella's hurt, brooding perception of the 'gapped tradition' of Irish writing, a brilliantly suggestive half-truth, is mentioned only in passing, but it deserves to be discussed, and argued about, throughout the entire work. The scope and design of the work encourage and facilitate closer consideration of interactions of English and Irish traditions of writing, but this tends to happen in a slightly haphazard fashion. The only mention of the Irish-language poet Hugh Mac Gauran (unindexed) is in a chapter on 'Prose in English, 1690-1800', where we learn that one of his poems was translated by Swift but hear nothing of his original context or place within Irish-language writing. Translation and appropriation (or indeed misappropriation) of Irish-language materials by writers in English should be a constant theme, but the most extended discussion of it is in Donna Wong's fascinating chapter on 'Literature and the oral tradition' where one would not necessarily look for it.

Margaret Kelleher's thoughtful and immensely well-informed chapter on 'Prose writing and drama in English, 1830-1890' notes a significant change of focus in 1902 in Katherine Tynan's more narrowly literary revision of Charles Read's admirably comprehensive *Cabinet of Irish Literature*, but a similar narrowing to concentrate more exclusively on the conventionally literary can be found in the later chapters of the present work. This is despite the flexible inclusiveness implied in the use of 'prose' rather than 'fiction' in chapter-titles. Increasing competition for space with the explosive increase of literary activity from around 1890 is probably the explanation, but it is still rather a pity. As the Field Day anthologists had noted, the

historical, political and religious themes and contexts of earlier Irish writing continue down into the nineteenth and indeed twentieth centuries, and the important oral dimension of Irish culture continues to include speech-making in English as well as poetry and folklore in Irish, but there is little room for any of this material in the second volume. Declan Kiberd's wide-ranging chapter on 'Literature and politics' is artfully placed at the beginning of the second volume to face both backwards and forwards from 1890, but it is more concerned with the political than with political writing as such.

Apart from a useful section on 'Religion and the novel' in the chapter on Irish Renaissance prose there is surprisingly little sense of the continuing political importance of religion and religious difference in relation to hotly contested issues of national and cultural identity. The national self-image, the triumphalist claim that the nation-in-waiting at the end of the nineteenth century was not just Catholic but the most purely Catholic nation in Europe, the gospel of 'Faith and Fatherland' propounded by popular preachers such as the celebrated Dominican Thomas Burke, was complicated by the different perspectives of Protestant writers, including Church of Ireland cultural nationalists such as Douglas Hyde or the novelist and clergyman 'George Birmingham', not mentioned here. Protestant clergy daughters such as Jane Barlow and Agnes Romilly White were able to convert alert pastoral attentiveness into well-observed rural fictions. But this kind of enriching complication is not fully addressed.

That neglected literary form, the essay, was particularly well suited to registering and exploring the spiritual and cultural ferment of Edwardian Ireland, buffeted by Nietzsche, nationalism and Catholic triumphalism, but essayists' prose is not really discussed. The iconoclastic Yeats-baiting 'John Eglinton' is mentioned

only in passing, the controversial journalist W.P. Ryan, who wrote the first account of the Irish Literary Revival in 1894 (in English), appears only as the Irish-language writer Liam P. Ó Riain, and the Belfast essayist Robert Lynd is absent altogether. Lynd had become a convert to the Gaelic League through his friendship with the nationalist antiquarian Francis Joseph Bigger, editor of the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* from 1894. But neither Bigger nor his journal is discussed and historical and economic writing is generally neglected. There is, regrettably, no counterpart to Clare O'Halloran's excellent chapter on 'Historical Writings, 1690-1890' in the first volume. Heated contemporary debates over 'revisionism' in Irish history, not considered here, are not just parallel to Irish literary discourses but integral to them, as some recent criticism has demonstrated, and the increasingly attenuated attention to 'history' in the second volume does no favours to poets such as Seamus Heaney who can publicly dream of a moment when hope and history rhyme.

Henry Grattan and John Philpot Curran, discussed in volume one, were far from being Ireland's last political orators, but they are the last to receive much attention here. And however much one might regret it, the anti-Catholic *brio* of the sermons as well as the fiction of Charles Maturin, noted by Claire Connolly, has not died away even two centuries later. Indeed the poet and critic Tom Paulin has carefully analysed the sectarian rhetoric of Ian Paisley. The distinctive traditions of Irish rhetoric in courtrooms as well as pulpits and parliaments represent an important if often ironically negotiated strand in Irish writing and Irish theatre, but, regrettably, there is no scope to pursue them in any detail. In 1910 the rhetorically charged anti-socialist addresses of the Jesuit priest R.J. Kane provoked the socialist rhetoric of James Connolly's *Labour, Nationality and Religion* (1910). But, despite Declan

Kiberd's brief, intriguing *apperçu* that Connolly was an Irish Modernist (II, p.31), neither he nor Kane receive much attention.

Increasing competition for space has other unfortunate consequences. There is room for earlier English sojourners such as Edmund Spenser, but John Henry Newman is virtually ignored, despite the Irish context of his famous *Idea of a University* and his influence on Irish writers as diverse as James Joyce and the hymn-writer Cecil Frances Alexander (who is also excluded from consideration). Early scientific writing is appropriately registered in discussion of the Boate brothers who collaborated on *Ireland's Natural History* (1652), but this theme is not followed through into the nineteenth century despite the cultural importance of the physicist John Tyndall's agnostic 'Belfast Address' of 1874 and Irish accommodations of Darwinian theory which have recently been inspected by John Wilson Foster, one of the contributors to the present work. William Petty's seminal *Political Arithmetic* (1690) is mentioned, as is Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* which engages with Irish matters, but the radical Irish economist and feminist William Thompson (1785-1833) is not, despite his influence not just on later Irish socialist writers such as James Connolly but (arguably) on Marx himself.

It is however a tribute to the *Cambridge History* that even if it is not fully comprehensive, even it does not always trace interesting continuities, it usually has the effect of encouraging readers to enquire further and make the connections for themselves. New insights and further scholarly research will develop from this rich and fertile source: it is bound to be a seminal work.

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